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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000182

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN AND EUR/ACE

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: IDHR ACKNOWLEDGES IMPORTANCE OF
PROMOTING CIVIL SOCIETY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4(b) and
(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Members of Turkmenistan's Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) met with the EUR/ACE Central Asia Assistance Review team on February 3 and discussed IDHR's recent activities. Former IDHR director Shirin Ahmedova, elected to the parliament just days before, was not present. IDHR deputy Shemshat Atajanova outlined the agency's recent activities, avoiding discussion of specific human rights cases or problems. She did, however, acknowledge the importance of promoting civil society in Turkmenistan. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Members of the visiting EUR/ACE delegation met with representatives from Turkmenistan's Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) on February 3. IDHR head Shirin Ahmedova, recently elected to Turkmenistan's parliament (Mejlis), was not present. Her deputy, Shemshat Atajanova, led the Turkmen side at the meeting.

¶3. (C) As is customary in official Turkmen meetings with U.S. delegations, Atajanova began by cataloging a long list of IDHR activities, as well as the Institute's size (51 employees) and composition. Among the activities that she highlighted was IDHR's assistance in preparing the Turkmen submission in the UN Human Rights Council's periodic universal review of human rights practices. She also mentioned its formal suggestions to the Mejlis on draft human-rights related legislation, such as laws on religious freedom and refugees. IDHR also analyzes the basis for Turkmenistan's accession to international conventions. She emphasized that this and similar activities are part of IDHR's role in ensuring that Turkmen national legislation is consistent with international standards.

¶4. (C) In several of the examples she cited, Atajanova noted that legislation alone is not sufficient to protect people's rights, for example in the areas of "public organizations" (the term Turkmen officials use when referring to non-governmental organizations) and state support for small business. In such areas, she said there have been shortcomings in the implementation of the legislation.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

15. (C) Atajanova said the government is currently reviewing IDHR's analysis of UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir's recommendations following her September 2008 visit. In March 2010, IDHR will hold seminars on international standards concerning associations and religious freedom, which would be co-sponsored by two state-affiliated organizations -- the Turkmen Union of Entrepreneurs and the Council on Religious Affairs. President Berdimuhamedov, she said, had underscored the importance of entrepreneurship and developing civil society in Turkmenistan at the first session of the Mejlis last year.

WHICH RIGHTS ARE MOST IMPORTANT?

16. (C) Atajanova described in detail the process by which citizens may petition IDHR seeking redress for grievances, and said that some complainants present their cases orally and in person. Rather than addressing the complaints directly, IDHR refers them to the relevant ministries, and "analyses them statistically." She described IDHR's role as "something of an ombudsman" in the complaints process. She said that many of the complaints involve job dismissals, dissatisfaction with judicial court verdicts, and construction and zoning problems. She emphasized that IDHR consultations are free of charge.

MEASURING SUCCESS

17. (C) In response to a question from the delegation about how IDHR measures the success of its efforts, Atajanova said that her agency uses no specific criteria. However, if

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IDHR's recommendations are incorporated into legislation and Turkmen citizens receive a positive outcome, "we consider that a success."

18. (C) COMMENT: During the meeting, Atajanova never strayed far from her talking points, but alluded to the importance of supporting civil society in Turkmenistan. As with most meetings at IDHR, the discussion for the most part touched on general human rights topics, avoiding any mention of specific problems or cases. END COMMENT.
CURRAN